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America's Philippine Bases: Vital, or Just Convenient?

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The United States couldn't make much use of its military bases in the Philippines to fight World War II because Japan had them.

The U.S. didn't use the bases for bombing raids during the Vietnam war because President Ferdinand Marcos wouldn't permit it. So B-52 bombers, for example, had to fly an extra three hours from Guam. And the U.S. had to build a new B-52 base in Thailand that cost five times more than the price tag for lengthening Clark Air Base's runway in the Philippines.

There are eight U.S. Navy and three Air Force installations in the Philippines. But they cannot be used against what the Pentagon sees as the region's biggest threat—Vietnam and the Soviet military buildup at Danang and Cam Ranh Bay. That's because in 1976, Mr. Marcos signed an agreement with Hanoi barring use of Philippines bases by any foreign country—including the U.S.—for attacks against Vietnam.

In fact, using the bases for any military action beyond defending the Philippines requires Manila's permission.

Although the Philippines faces no external threat, the U.S. is treaty bound to defend the country. And it pays for the privilege. The U.S. pays the Marcos government about $200 million in annual rent disguised as aid.

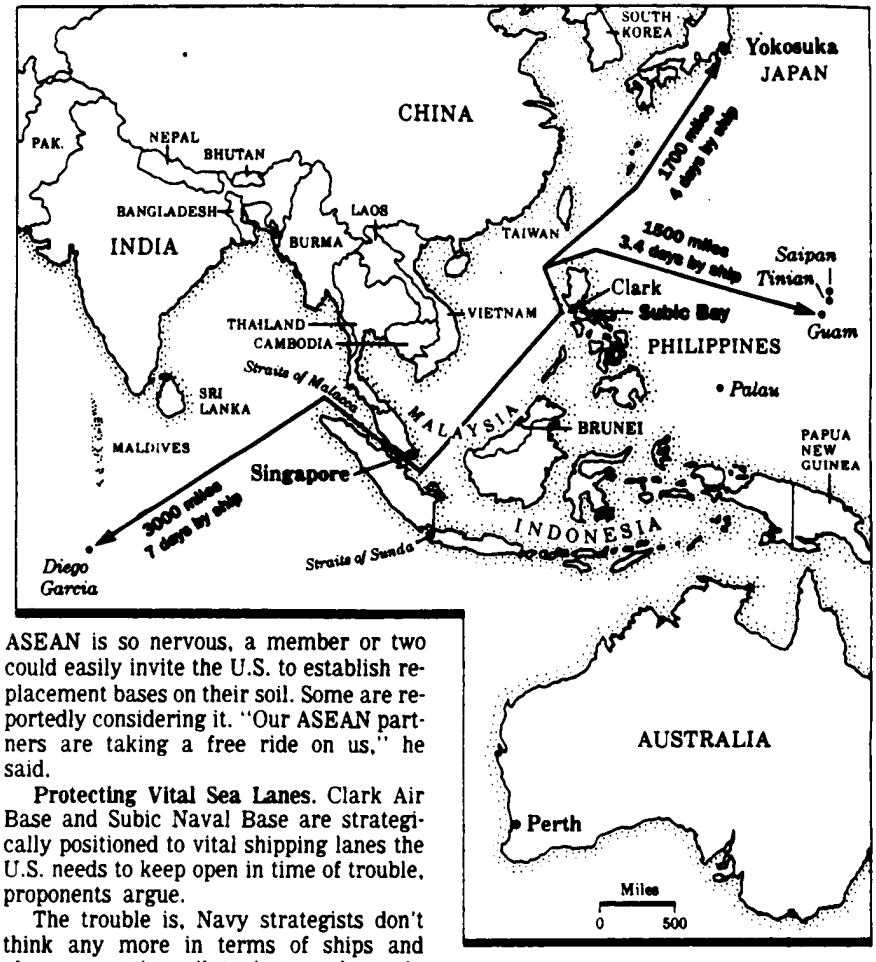
So the question arises, what good are they? Even the Reagan administration appears to be hinting that the bases aren't sacrosanct. Secretary of State George Shultz said yesterday that, while the bases were important, democracy in the Philippines was more important. "We have a stake in democracy," Mr. Shultz testified before the Senate Budget Committee. "Let's put that first, over and above the bases."

Nevertheless, the Pentagon over the years has ticked off a litany of reasons for keeping the Philippine bases:

Too Expensive to Move. The figure bandied about now is up to $8 billion.

In 1983, Adm. Robert Long, then the U.S. Pacific commander, told Congress that it would cost between $2 billion and $4 billion to build comparable bases elsewhere. How the price tag jumped to $8 billion in three years isn't known.

Regional Perceptions. If the U.S. pulls out, goes another argument, the other members of the Association of South East Asian Nations—Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei—would feel vulnerable. Before he was assassinated in 1983, Benigno Aquino Jr., the Philippines opposition leader, commented that, if ASEAN is so nervous, a member or two could easily invite the U.S. to establish replacement bases on their soil. Some are reportedly considering it. "Our ASEAN partners are taking a free ride on us," he said.



Protecting Vital Sea Lanes. Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base are strategically positioned to vital shipping lanes the U.S. needs to keep open in time of trouble, proponents argue.

The trouble is, Navy strategists don't think any more in terms of ships and planes escorting oil tankers and supply boats through troubled waters. Their strategy is to prevent enemy warships from getting to the sea lanes in the first place.

Besides, they aren't vital U.S. sea lanes. They are vital to Japan and other regional allies. Some ask why Japan shouldn't defend them, or pay the U.S. to do the job.

Link to the Indian Ocean. The U.S. uses the Philippines bases as a way-station for ships and supplies in and out of the Indian Ocean.

But it also uses facilities in Singapore, which is 1,300 miles closer. Submarine-hunting P-3C Orion aircraft patrol the Indian Ocean from Singapore. In-flight refueling tanker jets operate out of Singapore. Some U.S. ships are repaired at the Sembawang shipyard in Singapore. Those facilities could be expanded, but would cost more.

If the Navy wanted to repair ships closer to their patrolling stations, it could easily tow any number of floating dry docks from Subic or elsewhere to the secure British-U.S. base at Diego Garcia, south of India. The U.S. also has use of air and naval facilities near Perth in Western Australia.

One justification for the Navy's massive shipbuilding program in recent years has been the need to minimize the value of fixed on-shore supply and repair bases by sprinkling the fleet with nearly 100 ships capable of performing these tasks while warships are underway.

The Air Force, similarly, has greatly increased its capability for air-lifting huge quantities of supplies over long distances. In addition, the primary mission of the 13th Air Force, based at Clark, isn't the Indian Ocean. It's the defense of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

Communications and Intelligence. It was previously argued that the ground stations used for military communications and listening in on the enemy were irreplaceable. But new technology and satellite surveillance has antiquated those in-

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stallations, base opponents argue.

Nuclear Weapons Stockpile. The Pentagon won't say, but it is widely believed that Subic Bay is the major storehouse for U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in the western Pacific. Guam is believed to be another.

But Guam is U.S. territory. Subic is a cul-de-sac ringed by mountains and difficult to defend. The announcements last fall that the Pentagon was planning to spend $1.3 billion "improving" the Philippines bases didn't explain that the idea is to improve U.S. abilities to defend those bases and their personnel against the communist New Peoples Army.

So far the NPA hasn't threatened the U.S. bases for a couple of reasons. First, they offer valuable propaganda points. Bringing NPA recruits into Angeles City outside Clark and Olongapo City outside Subic to see, firsthand, Americans at play, drunk and chasing local women, can steel anti-American feelings. At the same time, the NPA uses the bases as a prime source of illicit money and weapons.

But if the weapons magazine in the foothills near Subic is stocked with nukes, it may become increasingly unwise for the U.S. to keep them there.

Convenient, Cheap and Nice. The most potent argument for keeping the bases is that they are cut-rate multipurpose western Pacific pitstops where the U.S. military can resupply, train, recreate, repair and relax on the cheap. Skilled laborers, paid far below the U.S. minimum wage, who speak English, who like Americans, who permit American military personnel to live in a lifestyle unmatched at other bases, and who allow the U.S. military to storm beaches, bomb and strafe bamboo villages, are unique in the world.

The primary U.S. fallback positions are to Guam, which already has an Air Force base and a Navy harbor, but is located more than three steaming days east of Subic. North of Guam are the Northern Marianas islands of Saipan and Tinian, which are also firmly pro-American and have a territorial status equivalent to Puerto Rico but no in-place facilities yet. South of Guam is Palau, which is near the Philippines but cantankerously anti-nuclear.

Repair yards at Yokosuka in Japan are comparable but six times more expensive.

The U.S. is reportedly stepping up contingency planning to replace its Philippines facilities. The move, when authorized, will take five to six years, military planners estimate.